

AN ORANGE
LIGHT

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AN ORANGE LIGHT

When he was three years old – old enough for ecstasy on a Christmas morning – Horace Holloway asked his parents where Santa got the presents that he delivered to children all over the world.

"He and his elves make them," his father said. "They have a workshop up near the North Pole."

That was all either of his parents said on the subject, but it was a seed that, once planted in Horace's imagination, became a tree that filled his entire childhood with beauty.

His Christmas presents, much as he enjoyed them, became artifacts of something far more compelling, and he spent many hours imagining and re-imagining the workshop in which they had been made – the elves that made them, the shelves on which they had been stored, how they looked at various stages of manufacture, the worktables and benches and conveyor belts, the windows, the lighting, and so on.

As he grew older, Horace studied maps he couldn't read, and, in a meaningless script of his own invention, made lists of gear and supplies he would need for an expedition to the North Pole. He imagined each step of the journey, from tearful goodbyes at the local airport to turmoil at the staging area in some far northern outpost, and then to the final stage by dog sled with an Eskimo guide, speeding

across frozen tundra.

He imagined a night on which, through the narrow tunnel entrance to an igloo that he and his guide had constructed hurriedly in lieu of a tent, he saw a tiny orange square of light beaming out into the winter darkness.

Might it be? Shaking with anticipation, Horace would, in the repeated episodes of this fantasy, crawl out of his sleeping bag, careful not to wake his guide, and then through the entrance to the igloo and out onto the hard crust of snow. The moon had set, but the sky was lit by dancing northern lights and the sparkling diamond dust of stars. The only sound was a low moan of wind.

Afraid of being seen, Horace would drag himself across the snow on his belly, right up to the square of orange light, which came through a single window in the eave of a roof that thrust barely two feet above the surface of the snow. Kneeling, he saw a vast, candle-lit cavern open out below him, filled with worktables and benches and conveyor belts, shelves and shelves of toys at all stages of manufacture, glitteringly decorated wreaths and Christmas trees scattered everywhere, and an army of elves working with disciplined abandon.

But where was Santa? There he was, in miniature in a distant doorway, wearing red pants and black boots, and a gray-and-white flannel shirt with gray suspenders. He began to walk slowly towards Horace's window, clipboard in hand, checking off this and stopping to give orders about that, but always

with a jolly smile and twinkling eyes that made perfect sense of the chaos around him.

As Santa would approach Horace's window, Horace would duck his head hurriedly into the snow. When he dared raise it again, wiping snow from his burning chin and cheeks, Santa would be halfway back to the distant doorway, his back to the window, laughing good-naturedly as elves held up exquisitely carved and painted toys for his inspection.

As Horace grew even older, of course, he became aware that Santa, and therefore his workshop, was a myth. But strangely, rather than ending his fantasies, this inevitable realization merely transformed them. Instead of fantasizing about finding Santa's workshop, Horace turned to daydreaming about creating it, or at least a facsimile of it, somewhere near the North Pole so that children from all over the world could experience the fantasy first hand.

He would picture himself buying a piece of Alaska's North Slope and digging out the vast cavern he had seen so many times in his imagination. He would hire hundreds of dwarves to serve as elves, who would actually make toys to be sold at the workshop store, and actors to play Santa and Mrs. Claus. Thousands of children (himself included, since he was still a child) would view this candle-lit scene kneeling in front of tiny windows carved into the workshop's eaves, and then, in the workshop store, would meet Santa and Mrs. Claus with some of the elves in a tiny roped-off portion of the workshop so as not to disturb

the vital work going on there.

But Horace did more than fantasize building this theme-park workshop – he set out to amass the necessary capital to invest in it. He begged his family for money rather than toys, and studied obsessively how to increase his funds, the result being that by the time he was in high school he had become expert in tax-free bonds, futures, arbitrage, hedge funds, and the like, graduating with several hundred thousand dollars to invest in his scheme – still, as he well knew, only a fraction of what he would need.

In college he majored in finance, graduating with over a million dollars, increasing that to several million by the time he earned his MBA. He got a job as a bond trader on Wall Street and in a few years actually had enough money to begin the project of his dreams. But unfortunately by that time the dream had disappeared. He had become old enough to realize that his beloved theme-park workshop at the North Pole would never be more than a fantasy. And with that fantasy had vanished the purpose of his pursuit of wealth, leaving behind nothing more than the pursuit itself.

At forty, he was a partner in his firm, was married with three children, lived in a mansion in a subdivision of mansions, and had little time or patience for fantasies. His former obsession with Santa's workshop was an embarrassing memory of childhood, and the orange light that had shone out into the winter darkness was no more.

Time passed, wives came and went, becoming

younger and younger as Horace grew older and older. He became estranged from his children as well as from his ex-wives and was absorbed in nothing more than vanity, momentary pleasure, and the pointless pursuit of wealth. He had one heart attack, then another, and was finally forced to retire, cared for by his fourth wife, a beautiful woman only slightly more than one-third his age.

At the age of seventy, Horace died, tended to in his final moments by his wife, who had for years fantasized what she would do when finally she was free to enjoy his money without him, and now stood utterly delighted on the threshold of her dream.

But he knew nothing of that. A few days earlier he had again been seized by his boyhood passion, and had begun to plan an elaborate trip to the North Pole on Christmas Eve. He imagined that his wife and doctors and numerous underlings protested against the idea vociferously, but what did that matter? As usual, he had his way.

He imagined sending an advance team to Fairbanks and then on to the North Slope, where they built a small encampment of Quonset huts on the shore of Camden Bay. The weather forecast turned out to be surprisingly favorable, and so Christmas Eve found Horace in a well-heated Quonset hut, putting on his cold-weather gear and emerging to begin the adventure he had put away like a childhood toy so long ago.

The crisp air outside was 35 degrees below zero, but there was no wind, and the snow drifts gleamed

under a spectacular display of northern lights that outshone the diamond dust of stars.

For a while a large group assembled outside the huddle of huts marveling at the beauty of the sky, but at last Horace told them he wanted to be alone, and all but he went inside.

Of course he knew he would find nothing, but he began anyway to crunch across the frozen snow drifts, arrayed like waves of stone across a level icy sea.

He walked long enough to find himself out of sight of the Quonset huts, long enough to be totally alone and suddenly a bit unsure and panicky about which direction would take him back the way he had come. Turning slowly 360 degrees as he scoured the horizon, he saw a tiny orange square of light in the distance, like a candle-lit window only two feet above the snow.

Heart racing, he dropped to his belly and dragged himself across the snow, as he had as a child, to make sure no one could see him. He pulled himself along, jamming his elbows into the crusted drifts, until he reached the window and got up on his knees to look inside.

And there it was! Just as he remembered it! The vast, candle-lit cavern, the elves crowded at their worktables and benches, the shelves filled with both finished and unfinished toys, the glitteringly decorated wreaths and Christmas trees. And Santa walking towards the window in his red pants and black boots, gray-and-white flannel shirt and gray suspenders, clipboard in hand, checking off this and pausing to

give orders on that.

As Santa approached the window, Horace knew that he was supposed to duck his head into the snow, but he couldn't move. Santa came closer and closer, then looked up at the window, as if expecting to see someone there, and smiled. "Come on in!" he motioned with his arm. "Come on!"

Horace got up off his knees, and as he walked along the buried roof of the workshop he noticed a tiny door down a flight of icy steps carved into the snow. He walked down the steps and the door opened, held by an elf who bowed merrily, eyes twinkling, and motioned him into the glowing orange light.